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## ABSTRACT

Noting that computers have fascinated teachers looking for new and better ways of teaching writing, not because the machines make students into better writers, but because they are useful tools that make editing and revising much easier, this paper explores the use of computers to teach writing, based on the experiences of a writing laboratory instructor at Chicago's Wilbur Wright College. The paper first discusses choosing a computer for the laboratory, recommending unconnected microcomputers over mainframes or networks. Next considered is choice of word processing software; full-featured programs are recommended but simpler programs for beginners are also suggested. Other software, such as spelling checkers, outlineurs, and style checkers are also discussed. Next the document focuses on political issues, such as the relationship of writing laboratories to administration, laboratory scheduling, and money matters. The document then examines the details of working word processing instruction into the freshman composition curriculum, stressing the importance of handouts. Advantages and disadvantages of using computers in composition courses are then enumerated, and the lack of research studies on the topic is noted. An annotated, selected bibliography is appended. (SKC)

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## COMPUTERS FOR COLLEGE WRITING:

### A PROMISING BEGINNING

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Presented at the University of Illinois at Chicago/City  
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From the teaching machines and drill-and-practice programs of the sixties and seventies through the microcomputers and word processing programs of the eighties, computers have fascinated teachers looking for new and better ways of teaching writing. Experiments and research projects and the resulting books and articles have proliferated, but so far there are no definitive answers to the complex problems of hardware and software selection, lab staffing and scheduling, or curriculum changes to accommodate computer use. No one has proved conclusively that students who use computers become better writers. However, computers have proved to be useful tools. Most students like computers and gain valuable skills as they use them. With word processing, editing and revising are no longer such time-consuming chores, and longer, neater, and more correct papers usually result.

In this short paper I cannot survey the history of, or summarize the research on, computers in composition. I cannot present all prevailing views or give detailed explanations of everything going on in this field. Instead, I shall give a broad overview of a complex topic, based mainly on personal experience, observation, and opinion rather than on formal research. For those who wish to explore the subject in depth, I recommend my selected bibliography. The extent of writing in the field is indicated by the Feldman and Norman book's selected bibliographies of thirty-four computer-related

journals and periodicals and 896 books, pamphlets, and articles on both writing and research applications of computers.

I shall begin by explaining how I became involved in using computers in my composition classes at Wright College and go on to review briefly such controversial issues as hardware, software, politics and lab management, and curriculum; to explain how my students have used computers for writing, what problems I have encountered, and what I have concluded from my experiments; and finally, to consider the future of computers in college writing. I hope I'll be able to show you why I have used the phrase "a promising beginning" in my title.

When Wright College got thirty IBM Personal Computers and fifteen IBM Graphics printers and set up a microcomputer lab in the former home economics room in spring, 1984 (Styne, "Yellow Curtains"), I immediately applied for a 1984-85 sabbatical and learned as much as I could about using computers in composition. I attended conferences, read journals, corresponded with teachers all over the country, and learned a great deal. During the past two years, I have taught twelve English 101 (first-semester college composition) classes which spent from one-third to one-half of their time in the microcomputer lab. I'll leave the details on how my students have used computers for later sections of this paper. In addition to those twelve classes, I taught one English 100, one English 102, and one literature class which visited the lab

occasionally, and also introduced at least nine classes other than my own to the microcomputer lab. For my first impressions of some of these efforts, see my article "Humility, Flexibility, and Humor in the Microcomputer Lab."

Besides my sabbatical, I have had released time during two semesters to pursue my conference and writing activities. I'd like to thank the local Wright College and central City Colleges administrations for providing excellent computer equipment and for supporting my efforts.

For anyone planning to set up a computer laboratory for writing, the first concern usually is, "What kind of computers?" There are large mainframe and minicomputer systems, both of which can and should be used for teaching composition if the systems are already established and offer enough access time. These systems, as well as networked or connected microcomputers, offer advantages for collaborative writing, communication among students and between teacher and students, and freedom from floppy disk handling. They also may offer such disadvantages as system overcrowding and those frustrating "system is down" times.

I admit to a bias in favor of unconnected microcomputers or personal computers. I guess I'm old-fashioned enough to feel uncomfortable about being at the mercy of some giant system over which I have no control. I like the idea of each student being in control of his or her computer, learning to

turn it on and off, and learning how to handle floppy disks. These skills can be very useful later in small offices and at home. Barring total power failure, our "system" cannot be "down." If one computer breaks down (and this doesn't happen very often), there are still twenty-nine available for a class to use.

I also admit a bias in favor of IBM Computers. While the Apple II series computers have held the lead in elementary and secondary schools, colleges (except for teacher training institutions) seem to be turning toward IBM. IBM has set the standard for the business world, the destination of many of our students. Virtually all software is now available for IBM, including most of the educational programs originally written for Apple. The newer Apple Macintosh offers superior sound and graphics, but I still prefer the IBM for writing.

There are other excellent microcomputers available, including many IBM compatibles. The problem with some other excellent computers, such as the DEC, is that there is so little educational software available for them.

Actually, any computer system or brand of microcomputer can be used for teaching composition as long as a manageable word processing program is available. Other important hardware considerations involve monitors, disk drives, printers, memory, and more. I'll only say here that I have found both monochrome and color monitors (we have some of each), two floppy disk drives per computer, one dot matrix printer for every two

computers, and memory from 256 to 512 kilobytes perfectly adequate. You may consult the books in my bibliography, especially the Collins and Sommers and the Wresch books, for explanations of unfamiliar terms and to see what hardware has been used and how. You'll find no general agreement on what system is best.

In computer software for composition, the most important item is the word processing program, the program which lets the writer move, erase, and otherwise manipulate words on a screen. If you talk to three or four computer-buff English teachers, you are likely to get three or four opinions on the best program to use. To oversimplify, the choice is between full-featured but hard to learn and limited but easy to learn. A full-featured program can be simplified for student use; a limited program can be mastered with little training.

The full-featured programs usually are fast, and they do such things as automatic footnoting and indexing, multiple columns, windows (allowing more than one document to be on the screen at once), and many more magic things. A professional writer and scholar undoubtedly needs such a program, and my choice would probably be Word\_Perfect (Word Perfect Corp.), which seems to have replaced WordStar (MicroPro) as an office standard.

The other major computer user in the Wright College English Department swears by the speedy, complex XyWrite

program (XyQuest), which is related to the MLA-endorsed and even more complex Nota Bene. I find command-driven XyWrite maddening, an attitude my colleague attributes to either stubbornness or stupidity on my part. Actually, different programs work best for different writers.

For an advanced student, a prolific writer, or a secretary who uses a word processing program every day, Word Perfect or XyWrite or the latest version of WordStar, or any of several other programs, should work very well. For the occasional user, including the college freshman who is likely to forget a great deal during school vacations, I recommend Bank Street Writer III (Scholastic), my favorite among the easy-to-learn programs. Version III is far superior to earlier versions. The program is easy to master and impossible to forget, requiring virtually no training, and it includes a spelling checker, thesaurus, and calculator (Styne, "Bank Street Writer III"). Word Perfect also includes a spelling checker; XyWrite does not at this time.

It is possible to use almost any word processing program to teach composition. A teacher can pick out the essential functions of any program and introduce them to his or her students. My suggestion is to sit down and try to write with whatever program you plan to use, and try to imagine how your students will react to it.

Cost, a complex and ever-changing matter I did not mention earlier, may be an important issue in choosing a word

processing program. Thirty copies of Bank\_Street\_Writer\_III cost about \$950; a site license for XyWrite costs about \$2,500. These prices are approximate and subject to change at any time. There are alternatives to purchasing multiple copies or site licenses for word processing programs as we have done at Wright. One is the McGraw-Hill college version of Word\_Perfect, designed for purchase by individual students at \$19.95. Another is a comprehensive writing program including a word processor, such as HBJ\_Writer (Harcourt). Still another alternative is PC\_Write, a shareware program which may be copied legally.

What about other programs? I consider a spelling checker essential because it calls students' attention to misspelled words without making decisions for them. My students are also encouraged to try Caret\_Patch (Harcourt), which is based on the Harbrace\_College\_Handbook, as well as Word\_Attack! (Davidson) and Word\_Challenge (Hayden) for vocabulary, Spell\_It! (Davidson) and Spell\_Facts (IBM Personally Developed Software) for spelling, Electronic\_Grammar:Parts\_of\_Speech (IBM PDS), Typing\_Tutor\_III (Simon & Schuster), and other instructional programs for extra credit. I have no proof of the effectiveness of any of these programs, but some students enjoy trying them. At Wright we also have ThinkTank (Living Videotext), an outlining program which I don't find very useful, and William Wresch's Writer's\_Helper (Conduit), a program I hope to experiment with next fall. This program

includes a prewriting section and an evaluation section (readability index, count of words in each sentence, homonyms, usage errors, etc.).

Politics and lab management are big issues which I shall just touch upon briefly. Here are a few possible problems and a few suggestions:

First, avoid trouble with other college or university departments. As an English teacher, don't call what you're doing "word processing"; call it "teaching writing with computers." Business and secretarial teachers do not want us invading their territory, and word processing for business has a different emphasis. Data processing and computer science departments often favor huge mainframe or minicomputer systems rather than microcomputers. Writing is likely to have the lowest priority on these systems. Try to get a separate lab for writers.

Be aware that some teachers and administrators will remain hostile to computers. Computers and software cost money, and immediate, spectacular, convincing results are unlikely. Also, some university English teachers studying and writing about computers face a lack of respect as well as serious problems in their battles for tenure.

Consider lab scheduling. How many hours should be scheduled for class use and how many for walk-in use in order to make the computers available to as many students as

possible? What departments will be permitted to hold classes in the lab? How should lab time be divided among departments and teachers?

Finally, consider money matters. Having a lab manager from the English faculty might be an excellent idea, but financial realities probably won't permit it. A dependable lab staff of student aides and writing tutors is very important. Another economic issue is a lab fee. Our students now pay \$2 per semester, which of course does not cover the costs of the data disks and computer paper they use.

Working word processing into the English 101 curriculum has been a big problem for me and for virtually everyone who has tried it. This can be handled in several ways, none of them necessarily ideal. Students can merely be told about the microcomputer lab and urged to go there for training and tutoring and independent writing. Or one or more introductory sessions can be held in the lab, handled either by the teacher or by the lab staff, and the class may be either required or encouraged to do all writing on the computers.

My method, spending nearly half of the class periods in the computer lab, has certain advantages, but it has cut down instructional, discussion, and conference time. My students generally have been allowed three class periods in the lab to learn Bank Street Writer III and to complete two or three drafts of their first essay, and two periods for each of the

other essays. They are, of course, urged to use the lab during free periods as well. Other lab periods have been spent on such things as advanced editing (moving, copying, replacing, and correcting text in a prepared document) and writing short poems with Stephen Marcus' Compuppoem (a good way to review the parts of speech and focus attention on words and what they can do). See my "Chicago Portraits from Compuppoem" and "Poems by Computer" for some examples of student poems.

Good organization and many handouts are a must for any computer-using class. I have switched from eight essays, one draft each, with revisions when necessary, to four essays, two drafts of each handed in. A first draft, which may be written with pen and paper, is not handed in; the printed second or working draft is handed in for comments but not complete marking of errors or grading; the printed final draft is graded. I emphasize getting the final draft right; usually revisions are assigned for D or F papers only. I want most of the errors to be found and corrected by the students, not by me.

I like the idea of multiple drafts of fewer papers. My work is certainly not easier, but I no longer get short throwaway C-minus papers scribbled on notebook paper just before class. The minimum length of assigned essays is two double-spaced printed pages, but most students write considerably more. Of course my students also write some

essay-type quiz answers, so they do at least as much writing as they did before computers, and probably more.

Teachers who are forced to follow a rigid common syllabus have more trouble integrating word processing into their curriculums. Fortunately, our syllabus is quite flexible; I have interpreted it in my own way, but I have not abandoned it.

Finally I've reached the key questions: how does all this work? Why use computers in composition at all? Here are the advantages I have observed:

First, the most obvious advantage is that printed papers are much neater and much easier to read than handwritten papers. More important, students seem to have better attitudes toward writing. Young people tend to like computers, which are still somewhat exciting and trendy. Students take great pride in seeing a neatly printed paper; their papers may never have looked so good before. Papers tend to be longer and better developed.

Then, it is very easy to revise and edit a paper saved on a computer disk. Paragraphs can be moved around, expanded, changed, or eliminated. The teacher can reasonably require multiple drafts and near-perfection once tedious retyping or rewriting is eliminated.

The computer lab should be a good place for collaborative efforts, with tutors and teacher able to help while writing is in progress. Also, it is easy to print multiple copies of a

paper for peer evaluation, or one copy to work on at home and one to hand in.

Finally, learning to use computers while learning to write is excellent job training. Freshmen often consider English composition a required, painful course of questionable value, but they see computers as a connection to the real world of work.

Unfortunately, I still have some problems to work out. First, it is almost impossible to give class instruction in a microcomputer lab designed for independent work as ours is. Students face in different directions and are usually eager to proceed with their own work. I understand that Michigan Technological University has a state-of-the-art lab for writing instruction, a lab I'd like to visit sometime. Meanwhile, I plan to try using our new Kodak Datashow machine to project computer images on a large classroom screen; my students will have fewer sessions in the microcomputer lab and more instructional and discussion time next semester.

Also, while immediate help with writing problems is supposed to be an advantage of using a microcomputer lab, a majority of my students do not ask for or even accept help from me or from the tutors while they are writing. They may be reflecting my own attitude toward writing as a private, isolated activity, although I try to emphasize the importance of asking for help. I don't yet know how to make tutoring,

group work, or peer review acceptable to a heterogeneous group of students past the remedial-developmental level.

Then, a small number of students depend too much on the scheduled lab periods and don't use either of the two strategies I suggest, extensive planning and writing at home or extra lab work during free periods. These few students often rush through their papers during class sessions in the lab and hand them in incomplete and unedited, or simply don't hand their papers in at all. I never intended to give enough class lab time for all writing activities; next semester I'll allow less time to force the students to use the lab outside of class, a habit they should develop for their writing in other courses.

Some of the problems I anticipated, such as non-typists' inability to cope, computer phobia, file loss, and frequent computer breakdowns, never materialized.

Where do we go from here? I see computers as generally accepted and perhaps required tools for all college writing. Indeed, students at some colleges and universities are already required to purchase computers. Undoubtedly there must be more research on methods and effects of using computers for writing. You've probably noticed that I have not reported on a single research project on writing with computers. Actually, there are many, and I have invited you to read about them in the publications listed in my selected bibliography.

Most of the research projects are interesting, but somehow limited and inconclusive. Adding hardware and software variables to the many human and other variables I find so troubling in composition research creates problems. I won't attack individual projects or pretend to summarize research done so far, but some research methods seem very intrusive. I could not write in a booth with a computer recording my every keystroke and preventing me from scrolling back to earlier parts of my writing; I could not write with an observer asking why I make every editing or revising move. Both of these research techniques have been used with computer writers. I would not expect my students to write well under those or similar conditions, especially after I've noted their preference for privacy as they write. Some other studies involve only one to eight students and don't seem significant for larger classes.

Do I have an ideal research method? No. As a start, I would like smaller composition classes and time to confer with each student repeatedly, probably not while he or she is writing. I would like to study changes made through succeeding drafts of several papers, and determine whether students change their revising and editing strategies for later papers as they become more accustomed to writing with computers. Of course such research has been attempted, but generally not in two-year colleges.

I would also like to try more CAI (computer-assisted instruction) programs, and I have already noted that I hope to have my students try Writer's Helper. I plan to continue looking for the best way to integrate computer lab use and writing instruction.

Reality for me is my usual teaching load of about one hundred composition students divided into four classes. I will probably have to leave research to others. However, I will continue to have my students do most of their writing in the Wright College Microcomputer Lab. My enthusiasm, as well as that of many other computer-using writing teachers, remains high. At the February, 1987, Midwest Regional Conference on English in the Two-Year College, the thirty to thirty-five participants in the "Dialogue on Computers" session I moderated agreed that they wouldn't think of giving up computers for their students or themselves. Computers do indeed represent a promising beginning for those seeking better ways to teach college writing.

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- . "Yellow Curtains and Kitchen Sinks in the Microcomputer Lab." Midwest Messenger May 1986: 5-6. Midwest Regional Conference on English in the Two-Year College.

## Annotated Selected Bibliography

**JOURNALS and PERIODICALS.** See also the list of thirty-four computer related journals and periodicals in the Feldman and Norman book listed below.

ACE Newsletter, ed. Tom Decker. Assembly on Computers in English, National Council of Teachers of English. Membership, including subscription: \$10 for individuals, \$25 for institutions. Four issues per school year. Tom Decker, Westview Centennial Secondary School, 755 Oakdale Road, North York, Ontario, Canada M3N 1W7.

\* Computers and Composition, ed. Cynthia L. Selfe and Kathleen E. Kiefer. Subscription: \$8 for individuals, \$20 for institutions. Three issues per school year. Make checks payable to Michigan Technological University. Cynthia Selfe, Humanities Department, Michigan Technological University, Houghton, MI 49931.

**BOOKS and PAMPHLETS.** See also the comprehensive bibliography of 896 books and articles in Feldman and Norman, below.

\* Collins, James L. and Elizabeth A. Sommers, eds. Writing on Line: Using Computers in the Teaching of Writing. Boynton, 1985. Like the Wresch book below, a collection of articles on research and practice by some of the pioneers in the field.

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Schwartz, Helen J. Interactive Writing: Composing with a Word Processor. New York: Holt, 1985. A college composition text with computer lab writing exercises and projects. Includes an instructor's manual and textfile disks for IBM or Apple microcomputers.

Sudol, Ronald A. Textfiles. San Diego: Harcourt, 1987. A rhetoric for college and university students, "a brief guide to both the enduring qualities of good writing and the benefits that the new technology can have on the way (students) write."

\* Highly recommended.